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Flying Drone: Intelligence Workhorse?

The Pentagon and the CIA are developing and deploying nearly \$3 billion worth of sophisticated flying drones (known as Remotely Piloted Vehicles, or RPVs).

This flying transmitter may become the workhorse of the intelligence business. Already, some are operating as spy planes over El Salvador and Nicaragua.

The Israelis demonstrated the usefulness of RPVs in Lebanon, where they provided "live" television coverage of Syrian and other forces, tricked antiaircraft missile batteries into turning on their radars (thus giving away their locations), and served other battlefield purposes.

It was the Americans' use of drones in Vietnam that led to Israel's interest. Jet-powered target drones launched from transport planes flew more than 3,000 reconnaissance missions in Vietnam, and it was an American engineer, Alvin Ellis, who sold the Israeli military on RPVs in the early 1970s.

The advantages of RPVs over manned aircraft are many and obvious: They cost a relative pittance compared with the price of fighters and reconnaissance planes. Needing none of the equipment that keeps pilots alive, drones burn a fraction of the fuel used by manned planes and can also be maneuvered at speeds that no pilot could withstand. Their ground controllers are far cheaper to train than pilots—and of course when a drone is shot down, no one is killed or captured. The RPV is extremely hard to knock down because of its tiny radar "signature"—derived from its size of no more than about 14 feet—and from its minimal heat

output, which thwarts infra-red trackers and heat-seeking missiles.

The Air Force plans to buy about 250 mid-range RPVs for a supplementary reconnaissance role, but is generally not enthusiastic about the little planes. The General Accounting Office, which favors wide use of the low-cost drones, attributes the Air Force's lack of interest to a longstanding "pro-pilot bias" and a "perception of RPVs as too drab and unexciting to generate much enthusiasm." A GAO report adds:

"Therefore, while RPVs are accepted during wartime for very high-risk missions of mundane jobs such as chaff dispensing and leaflet dropping, during peacetime they are not regarded with as much favor as the high-technology manned aircraft."

The Army, Navy and CIA are more enthusiastic about the RPV, and the Marines are experimenting with a remote-control helicopter.

Correction: On Nov. 24, we reported that two former high-level government officials had been involved in the secret arms/hostages negotiations with Iran. One of them, ex-CIA official Thomas Clines, we reported, had been indicted in an arms scandal in 1984, had pleaded guilty to filing false invoices with the Defense Department, and had been fined \$10,000.

That is not correct. According to his attorney, John Ellsworth Stein of Washington, D.C., Thomas Clines has never been indicted for anything. Systems Services International Inc., a company in which he held stock, was indicted in the arms matter, however, and did pay a \$10,000 fine.